Meaning of Public Expenditure:

Expenses incurred by the public authorities—central, state and local self- governments—are called public expenditure. Such expenditures are made for the maintenance of the governments as well as for the benefit of the society as whole.

There was a misbelief in the academic circles in the nineteenth century that public expenditures were wasteful. Public expenditures must be kept low as far as practicable. This conservative thinking died down in the twentieth century, especially after the Second World War.

As a modern state is termed a ‘welfare state’, the horizon of activities of the government has expanded in length and breadth. Now we can point out the reasons for enormous increase in public expenditure throughout the world even in the capitalist countries where laissez-faire principle operates. These are the following.

Causes of Increase in Public Expenditure:

(a) Size of the Country and Population:

We see an expansion of geographical area of almost all countries. Even in no-man’s land one finds the activities of the modern government.

Assuming a fixed size of a country, developing world has seen an enormous increase in population growth. Consequently, the expansion in administrative activities of the government (like defence, police, and judiciary) has resulted in a growth of public expenditures in these areas.

(b) Defence Expenditure:

The tremendous growth of public expenditure can be attributed to threats of war. No great war has been conducted in the second half of the twentieth century. But the threats of war have not vanished; rather it looms large. Thus, mere sovereignty, demands a larger allocation of financial sources for defence preparedness.

(c) Welfare State:

The 19th century state was a ‘police state’ while, in 20th and 21st centuries modern state is a ‘welfare state’. Even in a capitalist framework, socialistic principles are not altogether discarded. Since socialistic principles are respected here, modern governments have come out openly for socio-economic uplift of the masses.

Various socio-economic programmes are undertaken to promote people’s welfare. Modern governments spend huge money for the purpose of economic development. It plays an active role in the production of goods and services. Such investment is financed by the government.

Besides development activities, welfare activities have grown tremendously. It spends money for providing various social security benefits. Social sectors like health, education, etc., receive a special treatment under the government patronage. It builds up not only social infrastructure but also economic infrastructure in the form of transport, electricity, etc.

Provision of all these require huge finance. Since a hefty sum is required for financing these activities, modern governments are the only providers of money. However, various welfare activities of the government are largely shaped and influenced by the political leaders (Ministers, MPs, and MLAs to have a political mileage, as well as by the bureaucrats (MPLAD)).

(d) Economic Development:

Modern government has a great role to play in shaping an economy. Private capitalists are utterly incapable of financing economic development of a country. This incapacity of the private sector has prompted modern governments to invest in various sectors so that economic development occurs.

Economic development is largely conditioned by the availability of economic infrastructure. Only by building up economic infrastructure, road, transport, electricity, etc., the structure of an economy can be made to improve. Obviously, for financing these activities, government spends money.

(e) Price Rise:

Increase in government expenditure is often ascribed to inflationary price rise.

Types of Public Expenditure:

Public expenditure may be classified into developmental and non-developmental expenditures. Former includes the expenditure incurred on social and community services, economic services, etc. Non-developmental expenditure includes expenditures made for administrative service, defence service, debt servicing, subsidies, etc.Public expenditure is classified into revenue expenditure and capital expenditure. Revenue expenditure includes civil expenditure (e.g., general services, social and community services and economic services), defence expenditure, etc. On the other hand, capital expenditure comprises expenditures incurred on social and community development, economic development, defence, general services, etc.

Public expenditure may also be classified as plan expenditure and non-plan expenditure.

Non-plan expenditure falls under two broad heads, viz., revenue expenditure and capital expenditure. The former comprises interest payments, defence expenditures, subsidies, pensions, other general services (like health, education), economic services (like agriculture, energy, industry, transport and communication, science, technology and environment, etc.)

Expenditures on agriculture, rural development, irrigation and flood control, energy, industry and mineral resources, etc., are included in plan expenditure.

Principles Governing Public Expenditure or Canons of Public Expenditure:

Rules or principles that govern the expenditure policy of the government are called canons of public expenditure. Fundamental principles of public spending determine the efficiency and propriety of the expenditure itself. While making its spending programme, government must follow these principles. These principles, in short, are called canons of public expenditure.

Findlay Shirras has laid down the following four canons of public expenditure:

(i) Canon of benefit

(ii) Canon of economy

iii) Canon of sanction

(iv) Canon of surplus

(i) Canon of Benefit:

According to this canon, public spending has to be made in such a way that it confers greatest social benefits. In other words, public expenditure must not be geared in such a way that it provides benefits to a particular group of the community. Thus, public expenditure is to be made in those directions where general benefits rather than specific benefits flow in.

However, often public expenditure is incurred for the benefit of a particular group (say, dalits, tribals). This sort of public expenditure does not violate canon of benefit. Any public expenditure for the development of a backward area does promote social interest.

(ii) Canon of Economy:

Economy does not mean miserliness. It refers to the avoidance of wasteful and extravagant expenditure. Public expenditure must be made in such a way that it becomes productive and efficient. Efficiency in public expenditure requires economy of expenditures. To enjoy the maximum aggregate benefit from any public spending programme, it is necessary that the canon of economy is observed.

An uneconomic expansion in public expenditure will result in scarcity of funds, the much-needed growth of the productive sectors will be hampered. This means lower social benefit. It is thus obvious that the canon of economy is not independent of the canon of benefit.

(iii) Canon of Sanction:

The canon of section, as suggested by Shirras, requires that public spending should not be made without any concurrence or sanction of an appropriate authority. Arbitrariness in public spending can be avoided only if spending is approved. Further, economy in public spending can never be ensured if it is not sanctioned.

(iv) Canon of Surplus:

This canon suggests the avoidance of deficit in public spending. Like individuals, saving is a virtue for the government. So the government must prepare its budget in such a way that government revenue exceeds government expenditure so as to create a surplus. It must not run deficit to cover its expenditure.

However, modern economists do not like to attach any importance to Shirras' fourth canon— the canon of surplus. To them, deficit financing is the most effective means of financing economic programmes of the government.

Importance of Public Expenditure:

An old-fashioned dictum says that "The very best of all plans of finance is to spend little, and the best of all taxes is that which is least in amount." No one today believes this philosophy. In the 1930s, J. M. Keynes emphasized the importance of public expenditure.

The modern state is described as the 'welfare state'. As a result, the activities of the modern government have widened enormously. Modern governments are undertaking various social and economic activities, particularly in less developed countries (LDCs).

i. Economic Development:

Without government support and backing, a poor country cannot make huge investments to bring about a favourable change in the economic base of a country. That is why massive investments are made by the government in the development of basic and key industries, agriculture, consumable goods, etc.

Public expenditure has the expansionary effect on the growth of national income, employment opportunities, etc. Economic development also requires development of economic infrastructures. A developing country like India must undertake various projects, like road-bridge-dam construction, power plants, transport and communications, etc.

These social overhead capital or economic infrastructures are of crucial importance for accelerating the pace of economic development. It is to be remembered here that private investors are incapable of making such massive investments on the various infrastructural projects. It is imperative that the government undertakes such projects. Greater the public expenditure, higher is the level of economic development.

ii. Fiscal Policy Instrument:

Public expenditure is considered as an important tool of fiscal policy. Public expenditure creates and increases the scope of employment opportunities during depression. Thus, public expenditure can prevent periodic cyclical fluctuations. During depression, it is recommended that there should be more and more governmental expenditures on the ground that it creates jobs and incomes.

On the contrary, a cut-back in government's expenditure is necessary when the economy faces the problem of inflation. That is why it is said that by manipulating public expenditure, cyclical fluctuations can be lessened greatly. In other words, variation of public expenditure is a part of the anti- cyclical fiscal policy.

It is to be kept in mind that it is not just the amount of public expenditure that is incurred which is of importance to the economy. What is equally, if not more, important is the purpose of such expenditure or the quality of expenditure. The quality of expenditure determines the adequacy and effectiveness of such expenditure. Excessive expenditures may cause inflation.

Moreover, if the government has to impose taxes at high rates there will be loss of incentives. So, it is necessary to avoid unnecessary expenditure as far as practicable, otherwise benefits of better economic development may not be reaped. As a fiscal policy instrument, it may be counter-productive.

iii. Redistribution of Income:

Public expenditure is used as a powerful fiscal instrument to bring about an equitable distribution of income and wealth. There are good much public expenditure that benefit poor income groups. By providing subsidies, free education and health care facilities to the poor people, government can improve the economic position of these people.

iv. Balanced Regional Growth:

Public expenditure can correct regional disparities. By diverting resources in backward regions, government can bring about all-round development there so as to compete with the advanced regions of the country.

This is what is required to maintain integration and unity among people of all the regions. Unbalanced regional growth encourages disintegrating forces to rise. Public expenditure is an antidote for these reactionary elements.

Thus, public expenditure has both economic and social objectives. It is necessary to ensure that the government's expenditure is made solely in the public interest and does not serve any individual's interest or that of any political party or a group of persons.

Meaning of Public Debt:

Modern governments need to borrow from different sources when current revenue falls short of public expenditures. Thus, public debt refers to loans incurred by the government to finance its activities when other sources of public income fail to meet the requirements. In this wider sense, the proceeds of such public borrowing constitute public income.

However, since debt has to be repaid along with interest from whom it is borrowed, it does not constitute income. Rather, it constitutes public expenditure. Public debt is incurred when the government floats loans and borrows either internally or externally from banks, individuals or countries or international loan-giving institutions.

What is true about public borrowing is that, like taxes, public borrowing is not a compulsory source of public income. The word 'compulsion' is not applied to public borrowing except in certain exceptional cases of borrowing.

Classification of Public Debt:

The structure of public debt is not uniform in any country on account of factors such as categories of markets in which loans are floated, the conditions for repayment, the rate of interest offered on bonds, purposes of borrowing, etc.

In view of these differences in criteria, public debt is classified into various categories:

i. Internal and external debt

ii. Short term and long term loans

iii. Funded and unfunded debt

iv. Voluntary and compulsory loans

v. Redeemable and irredeemable debt

vi. Productive or reproductive and unproductive debt/deadweight debt

i. Internal and External Debt:

Sums owed to the citizens and institutions are called internal debt and sums owed to foreigners comprise the external debt. Internal debt refers to the government loans floated in the capital markets within the country. Such debt is subscribed by individuals and institutions of the country.

On the other hand, if a public loan is floated in the foreign capital markets, i.e., outside the country, by the government from foreign nationals, foreign governments, international financial institutions, it is called external debt.

ii. Short term and Long Term Loans:

Loans are classified according to the duration of loans taken. Most government debt is held in short term interest-bearing securities, such as Treasury Bills or Ways and Means Advances (WMA). Maturity period of Treasury bill is usually 90 days.

Government borrows money for such period from the central bank of the country to cover temporary deficits in the budget. Only for long term loans, government comes to the public. For development purposes, long period loans are raised by the government usually for a period exceeding five years or more.

iii. Funded and Unfunded or Floating Debt:

Funded debt is the loan repayable after a long period of time, usually more than a year. Thus, funded debt is long term debt. Further, since for the repayment of such debt government maintains a separate fund, the debt is called funded debt. Floating or unfunded loans are those which are repayable within a short period, usually less than a year.

It is unfunded because no separate fund is maintained by the government for the debt repayment. Since repayment of unfunded debt is made out of public revenue, it is referred to as a floating debt. Thus, unfunded debt is a short term debt.

iv. Voluntary and Compulsory Loans:

A democratic government raises loans for the nationals on a voluntary basis. Thus, loans given to the government by the people on their own will and ability are called voluntary loans. Normally, public debt, by nature, is voluntary. But during emergencies (e.g., war, natural calamities, etc.,) government may force the nationals to lend it. Such loans are called forced or compulsory loans.

v. Redeemable and Irredeemable Debt:

Redeemable public debt refers to that debt which the government promises to pay off at some future date. After the maturity period, the government pays the amount to the lenders. Thus, redeemable loans are called terminable loans.

In the case of irredeemable debt, government does not make any promise about the payment of the principal amount, although interest is paid regularly to the lenders. For the most obvious reasons, redeemable public debt is preferred. If irredeemable loans are taken by the government, the society will have to face the consequence of burden of perpetual debt.

vi. Productive (or Reproductive) and Unproductive (or Deadweight) Debt:

On the criteria of purposes of loans, public debt may be classified as productive or reproductive and unproductive or deadweight debt. Public debt is productive when it is used in income-earning enterprises. Or productive debt refers to that loan which is raised by the government for increasing the productive power of the economy.

A productive debt creates sufficient assets by which it is eventually repaid. If loans taken by the government are spent on the building of railways, development of mines and industries, irrigation works, education, etc., income of the government will increase ultimately.

Productive loans thus add to the total productive capacity of the country.

In the words of Findlay Shirras: “Productive or reproductive loans which are fully covered by assets of equal or greater value, the source of the interest is the income from the ownership of these as railways and irrigation works.”

Public debt is unproductive when it is spent on purposes which do not yield any income to the government, e.g., refugee rehabilitation or famine relief work. Loans for financing war may be regarded as unproductive loans. Instead of creating any productive assets in the economy, unproductive loans do not add to the productive capacity of the economy. That is why unproductive debts are called deadweight debts.

Methods of Redemption of Public Debt:

Redemption of debt refers to the repayment of a public loan. Although public debt should be paid, debt redemption is desirable too. In order to save the government from bankruptcy and to raise the confidence of lenders, the government has to redeem its debts from time to time.

Sometimes, the government may resort to an extreme step, such as repudiation of debt. This extreme step is, of course, violation of the contract. Use of repudiation of debt by the government is economically unsound.Here, instead of concentrating on the repudiation of debt, we discuss below other important methods for the retirement or redemption of public debt:

i. Refunding:

Refunding of debt implies issue of new bonds and securities for raising new loans in order to pay off the matured loans (i.e., old debts).

When the government uses this method of refunding, there is no liquidation of the money burden of public debt. Instead, the debt servicing (i.e., repayment of the interest along with the principal) burden gets accumulated on account of postponement of the debt- repayment to save future debt.

ii. Conversion:

By debt conversion we mean reduction of interest burden by converting old but high interest-bearing loans into new but low interest-bearing loans. This method tends to reduce the burden of interest on the taxpayers. As the government is enabled to reduce the burden of debt which falls, it is not required to raise huge revenue through taxes to service the debt.

Instead, the government can cut down the tax liability and provide relief to the taxpayers in the event of a reduction in the rate of interest payable on public debt. It is assumed that since most taxpayers are poor people while lenders are rich people, such conversion of public debt results in a less unequal distribution of income.

iii. Sinking Fund:

One of the best methods of redemption of public debt is sinking fund. It is the fund into which certain portion of revenue is put every year in such a way that it would be sufficient to pay off the debt from the fund at the time of maturity. In general, there are, in fact, two ways of crediting a portion of revenue to this fund.

The usual procedure is to deposit a certain (fixed) percentage of its annual income to the fund. Another procedure is to raise a new loan and credit the proceeds to the sinking fund. However, there are some reservations against the second method.

Dalton has opined that it is in the Tightness of things to accumulate sinking fund out of the current revenue of the government, not out of new loans. Although convenient, it is one of the slowest methods of redemption of debt. That is why capital levy as a form of debt repudiation is often recommended by economists.

iv. Capital Levy:

In times of war or emergencies, most governments follow the practice of raising money necessary for the redemption of the public debt by imposing a special tax on capital.

A capital levy is just like a wealth tax in as much as it is imposed on capital assets. This method has certain decisive advantages. Firstly, it enables a government to repay its (emergency) debt by collecting additional tax revenues from the rich people (i.e., people who have huge properties).

This then reduces consumption spending of these people and the severity of inflation is weakened. Secondly, progressive levy on capital helps to reduce inequalities in income and wealth. But it has certain clear-cut disadvantages too. Firstly, it hampers capital formation. Secondly, during normal time this method is not suggested.

v. Terminal Annuity:

It is something similar to sinking fund. Under this method, the government pays off its debt on the basis of terminal annuity. By using this method, the government pays off the debt in equal annual instalments.

This method enables government to reduce the burden of debt annually and at the time of maturity it is fully paid off. It is the method of redeeming debts in instalments since the government is not required to make one huge lump sum payment.

vi. Budget Surplus:

By making a surplus budget, the government can pay off its debt to the people. As a general rule, the government makes use of the budgetary surplus to buy back from the market its own bonds and securities. This method is of little use since modern governments resort to deficit budget. A surplus budget is usually not made.

vii. Additional Taxation:

Sometimes, the government imposes additional taxes on people to pay interest on public debt. By levying new taxes—both direct and indirect— the government can collect the necessary revenue so as to be able to pay off its old debt. Although an easier means of repudiation, this method has certain advantages since taxes have large distortionary effects.

viii. Compulsory Reduction in the Rate of Interest:

The government may pass an ordinance to reduce the rate of interest payable on its debt. This happens when the government suffers from financial crisis and when there is a huge deficit in its budget.

There are so many instances of such statutory reductions in the rate of interest. However, such practice is not followed under normal situations. Instead, the government is forced to adopt this method of debt repayment when situation so demands.